

# Climate Justice & Migration



National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights  
www.nnirr.org

## Dimensions and Impact of Climate Change

**The U.S. and other “developed” countries, with about 20% of the world’s population, are responsible for over 80% of the world’s carbon emissions, through the global economic and political structure promoted by the U.S. government and multinational corporations.**

At the current rate of carbon emissions, average global temperatures will rise between 3-5°C by 2050. A 3°C rise will increase sea levels as much as 1.3 meters (compared to just 21cm in the last 100 years.)

***Such temperature increase and sea level rise will dramatically displace communities in the following ways:***

- Rapid-onset (storms, hurricanes, floods, heat-waves, forest fires etc.) For example, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused 2 million people to become homeless.
- Slow-onset (drought/desertification, food crises, water shortages, sinking coastal lands, etc.) People will no longer be able to live on and cultivate the lands they have dwelled on for generations.
- Sea-level rise: Communities in deltas (where there is a high concentration of people), atoll islands (small island states), lowlands etc., would be inundated. A 1m sea-level rise would submerge 80% of the Maldives islands and 20% of Bangladesh, and destroy drinking water from flooded aquifers.

**By 2100, more than 20 countries are expected to experience 30-60% of agricultural and food production loss, 2.3 billion people will be threatened by mega-droughts, and almost 90% of people in rural communities around the world will lose their livelihoods.**

The number of people already displaced by climate change is around 25 million (more than those displaced by war). By 2050, this could reach up to 250 million!

Action plans promoted by the U.S. such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation & Forest Degradation) and carbon-offset trading also lead to forced displacement as vast communities are relocated due to land-grabs and large-scale development projects such as reforestation projects.

### The Debate on ‘Definition’

**There is an unresolved debate on defining “climate migrant” or “climate/environmental refugee”:**

Some argue that there is a need to define a new class of climate refugees who have been forcibly displaced by the effects of climate change and that they be given special protections and status (such as refugee status under the Refugee Convention), and even redress for this injustice.

Others suggest that defining a special class of climate refugees would create a hierarchy of immigrants, and would split and differentiate climate refugees from economic refugees, who are all affected by the same global economic and political system.

## Climate Justice and Immigrant Rights

**There is a direct link between the struggle for climate justice and immigrant rights:**

- Most often, communities that are displaced are working class, indigenous, communities of color.
- Increased restrictions in immigration, the intensification of enforcement measures both at the U.S. border and in the interior, and the criminalization of immigrant communities expose climate migrants to further exploitation.
- Because of such repression, immigrants get “tracked” into environmentally hazardous lands in the U.S. -- immigrant communities disproportionately comprise large sectors of frontline communities who face devastating ecological adversities.
- Congressional proposals for immigration reform have not recognized the impact of U.S. policies on displacing communities through climate change and have not tackled the need to redress the injustice faced by these communities.
- Proposals by the Trump Administration as well as proposals for climate legislation do not acknowledge the displacing effects of climate change and the conditions endured by these communities.
- The People’s World Conference on Climate Change (PWCCC) in Bolivia was the first international body to acknowledge these connections and recognized the criminalization and exploitation of migrant communities through climate change. It also submitted a list of demands to redress this injustice.

***Only through real solutions for climate justice and real protections of immigrant rights can a just transition to a safe and equitable economy and ecology be realized!***

**U.S. immigration and environmental policies do not acknowledge the impact of these policies on displacing communities through climate change, nor tackle the need to redress the injustice faced by these communities.**

### Dispelling the Myths from the Right

***There is increasing effort by the Right to “Green the Hate”:***

- Population Control proponents argue that too many people in the Global South (i.e. people of color) are to blame. They ignore the fact that 80% of carbon emissions come from the Global North (with only 20% of the world population), compared to the entire continent of Africa, which produces only 2.5% of the world’s emissions. **The U.S. is the worst offender, producing 20 tons of carbon emissions per person**, compared to just 3.9 tons in Mexico and 0.2 tons in Bangladesh. They argue for more birth-control efforts, which only undermine real gender justice and reproductive rights of women of color in the Global South.
- “Climate Wars” is a fear-based narrative being promoted by the U.S. military. It suggests that climate change will displace vast numbers of poor communities who will engage in violent conflict over scarce resources, storm the U.S. borders, and/or become “terrorists”. Such images are built upon fear and racism to increase support for militarization at the border and military expansion into other countries.
- Anti-immigrant groups have tried to align themselves with environmental groups by suggesting that immigrants are over-populating the U.S. They argue that immigrants should remain in their home countries where they consume less energy. These efforts seek to blame immigrants, while allowing the largest polluters to get off the hook and not focus on transitioning to a just and green economy.